

June Seminar 2020

NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP

Due to Coronavirus restrictions, we will continue our seminars online until further notice. I will send members copies of the texts of the monthly seminars. New members, please contact us by the email:
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Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious (VIII)

Desire and *Jouissance*: Gide and Genet

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Lacan, at the outset, claims that the desire is the *cogito* of Freud's entire discourse, and this concept was reduced and elided by Western thought. Prior to Freud, the aim of all studies in the field of the 'human economy' was based on an investigation into ethics and morality, where the place of desire was reduced to almost nothing. The incredulity about the desire by no means makes this concept as a 'side-effect' in psychoanalysis. Lacan suggests the reason for this reductionism in Western thought has been the signifier and its relationship with desire. Lacan promises his audience that he would unfold the originality of desire when its isolation and eccentricity are examined in the signifiers. It will be done once the conditions that give birth to desire are discovered. Lacan calls this *jouissance* as the other pole of desire. This task will be accomplished by examining everything "from the perspective of witticisms, namely the nature of comedy," (Lacan, 2017, 236), especially the relation between the comedy and the phallus.

In the development of the subject, desire arises in the signifying chain when it is frustrated by rejection, a process that Lacan terms as *Versagung*. The psychoanalytic clinic encourages the analysts to deny the satisfaction to the patients' drives. That is a technic perhaps for fortifying the defense system of the patient. As elucidated in the former session, in psychoanalytic vocabulary, *Versagung* refers to a condition that denies drive's satisfaction, where deprivation in psychoanalytic vocabulary implies the non-existence of that condition and opportunity of satisfaction.

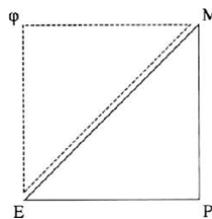
Seeking a Kleinian solution to get back to the origin of all, one must begin examining the "so-called oral-Sadistic satisfaction," (Lacan, 2017, 236) that leads to neurosis. Such satisfaction arises in an imagined form in the fantasy. That implies that everything begins with "an aggressive need to bite" (Ibid) concerning the maternal body at the fantasy level. Even though the signifier structures the unconscious fantasy, we cannot forget the role of the subject's imaginary relations and imagination in this process. In other words, this biting is not actual but fantasized where the fear of biting back is also a factor. For every first object, breast, lips, milk, etc. are all subject to signification. These objects play a role in providing an image and exchange for the Other's desire.

The definition of femininity as masquerade offers conditions for a woman to be the phallus, the signifier of desire. Discussing his reading of the Kleinian psychoanalysis, Joan Riviere's influential article, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," where she defines femininity "could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisal

expected if she was found to possess it,” (Riviere, 1986, 38). Riviere, as Lacan says, presents a case study of a professional and independent woman who did all masculine functions at home and in public while standing out as a woman with all right qualifications as being a woman and a wife. Nevertheless, the author specifies something hidden in her, which was considered the ground of her fitting femininity. This something hidden was also disharmonious with the outside world. This something was simply, “her hidden satisfaction of superiority over the parental characters,” (Lacan, 2017, 238). This feeling of satisfaction was not on a par with the universal qualities of femininity, yet it was the real problem in her case, for these qualities produced “for a time the disappearance of a satisfying outcome to sexual act—which according to the author, proves her case,” (239). Lacan agrees with Riviere that the source of this woman's pride was a defensive posture against men's revenge for challenging their masculine power. During analysis, it became clear that she adapted this position to avoid punishment from men around her. She was showing along with the phallic character with ultimate devotion in the service to men. One could see a mixture of aggression and enjoyment out of her feeling of power in her conduct, originally arisen from her history of rivalry first with mother and then father.

She would adopt a mask, particularly in her professional activities in relation to men—although she was highly qualified, she would suddenly adopt, with a kind of self-effacement, an excessively modest even anxious attitude to the quality of what she had done, thus, in reality, playing a game of coquettishness, as Mrs Joan Riviere puts it. (240)

From here, Lacan draws his theoretical point that the human subject allies in himself with the source of all passions [*eros* and *thanatos*] that unfolds masochism in a psychoanalytic clinic “by which the subject apprehends the pain of existence,” (Ibid). Lacan’s point is that this subject’s existence is always split from being locked up in signifiers. This split is where we reach the unconscious. The unconscious discourse isn’t the last word of the unconscious, the bottom of it lies in the subject’s desire to be recognized,” (Ibid).



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Lacan draws a schema here identified with the double triangles. The EMP (subject, Mother, Father), and the ego $i\phi$ (ego, ideal ego, the imaginary phallus). The EMP has three poles which construct the signifying ground of the child’s entire progress in its relationship with MP. His relationship with M is significant because the mother is the first object that must be symbolized by the child. As the *fort/da* game illustrates, the mother's presence or absence is the child’s sign whose desire is also situated, “and which will make him or not make him, not simply a satisfied child or not, but a desired or undesired subject,” (241). Lacan claims that the analytical experience taught him that since the mother and then her desire play a crucial role in forming the child’s desire, this makes the child the ‘desired child.’ The P, the father, is a signifier through which other signifiers develop. The signifiers' creative nature shows that the father is the creator,

‘the absolute creator.’ Lacan means that the source of all other signifiers and that which determines the places all other signifiers in the signifying chain is the Other's place from where signifiers emerge. The subject, as detached from its existence, also arises from this relation. Thus, the identification of the subject takes place in the triadic relations with the signifiers. The subject discovers his desire with his image, the mother, and her desire. As usual, after this theorization of the desired child and undesired child, Lacan introduces a literary illustration of this by examining André Gide's childhood that is exposed by Jean Delay in his book that Lacan calls a ‘pathography,’ *La Jeunesse d' André Gide* (youth of Gide), as Lacan sketches.

We know that Gide, this graceless child—as the author says somewhere on seeking a photograph the sight of which made the person tremble—would indulge in the most deformed images in his erotics, his primitive autoerotism, since, as he says, he could achieve an orgasm by identifying with situations of catastrophes. For example, he was able to achieve an orgasm very early on by reading Madame de Ségur, whose books are fundamental with all the ambiguity of primordial sadism, but where this sadism is perhaps not fully developed. (242)

By adding more of Gide's abnormal behavior from the same book, Lacan is tantalizing his audience that Gide's first relationship with his mother was such an appalling state. The mother left Gide in “a completely unsituated position,” (242). It might be awkward for some Lacanians that see that Lacan analyzes Gide's biography in his criticism. He does the same in his “The Youth of Gide, or the Letter to Desire,” (*Écrits*) and elsewhere. Lacan states that we have to look at Gide's memories to find out the moment of his entification [the action of giving objective existence to someone], which is “his identification with his young female cousin,” (Ibid) Madeline, who was two years older than him. That moment as Gide unveils in his memories, is when he found his cousin one day in tears and euphoria for a clandestine love affair. After seeing his aunty in a lover's arms, he sees his cousin when he climbs to his house's second floor. After this day, he falls in love with his female cousin. For Lacan, this love was not for her beauty but sparked by her behavior on that day. As Gide reveals in his novel, *La Porte Étrière* (Strait is the Gate), Gide encounters his female cousin and his aunty in a passionate state who once tried to seduce him. As an undesired child, Gide becomes the desired child via his cousin, where the seduction attempt played an important role. He found his position as a subject in the symbolic, which was absent up until that time. His experience as being an undesired child connected to his mother who created a gap in him as a subject, but at this moment, he found impulses in his aunty that he does not accept, as Lacan says, “he is unable to accept the desire of which he is an object,” (243). Lacan shows enormous interest in finding an intersection in human behavior that holds key to the triggering of the symptom. As Lacan attempts to spatialize the generative development of the symptom in the following passage.

What happened at that moment? At the time of the seduction, he became the desired child, and moreover, he fled in horror effectively because nothing had ever contributed the elements of an approach and a mediation that would have made this anything other than a trauma. Still, he had found himself in the position of a desired child for the first time. This new situation, which in some respects was to be his salvation, would nevertheless fixate him on profoundly divided position, by reason of the atypical, late and—I repeat this—unmediated way this encounter took place. (243)

Lacan finds in this twisted relationship an answer to homoerotic tendencies that Gide's works reveal about young boys. Through his works, he is projecting his existence. Gide finds himself in extreme distress once losing the collection of letters between him and his wife after she burns

them all. This moment makes Gide as miserable as Harpagone when he loses his money chest in Molière's *The Miser*. With allusion to Molière's play, Lacan introduces the comedy and its theory by looking at this genre's original carnivalesque feature. The comedy as such, holds the key to man's existence. The origin of the theatre was associated with the community and its ritualistic needs. That was also true to the other pole of performance, tragedy.

At the time of the great period of Greek theatre, tragedy represented man's relationship to speech, insofar as this relationship seizes him in his fatality—a fatality in conflict, insofar as the chain that binds man to the law of signifiers is not the same at the level of the family as at the level of the community. That is the essence of tragedy...Comedy arises at the point at which the subject and man attempt to adopt a different relationship to speech from that in tragedy. It's no longer a matter of committing to or adopting contrary necessities, nor is it a question of it being only one's own affair. (245-246)

This quote is crucially important, and to understand it comprehensively, we need to clarify a few things here. We need to read the speech as language, word, or signifier. Lacan's intention here is to define tragedy as a reflection of man's traumatic and tragic fate when he is introduced and subjected to the signifier. The signifier makes a man what he is not. The signifying chain that he receives it as a prohibiting symbolic law takes his *jouissance* away from him. Thus, the tragedy demonstrates how the gap produced in his self is unbridgeable, and therefore hero's life ends at the end of a tragedy.

On the contrary, a compromise befalls in the comedy where the hero escapes a tragedy's fate. Instead, he/she ends up as a laughingstock. From Aristophanes to the present-day comedies presents an interior human need to show the subject with its signified that is fundamental to the articulation of the signifying chain. As Lacan remarks, "the signified must arrive fully developed on the scene of comedy. Comedy embraces, gathers and takes enjoyment from the relationship with an effect that has a fundamental relation to the signifying order, namely the appearance of the signified called the phallus," (246). Lacan has the existence of a phallus or its image in the comedy festival in ancient Greece. To decipher the art of comedy, Lacan examines Jean Genet's *Le Balcon* (The Balcony) as a compelling example.

Genet was a controversial dramatist who bewildered critics in modern literary studies over whether to categorize him as an absurdist or pioneer of the theatre of cruelty. As *Le Balcon* bears evidence, Genet was like Alfred Jarry, Artaud, and Beckett, a legionnaire of his own school—theatre as a revolutionary art and a front for staging rebellion against society. His protagonists were of great interest to Sartre, who lavished upon him the title of the 'Saint'. In *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, he observes his characters, the best examples of existentialist men, who scrupulously find a way to survive in a hostile environment. In this warfare, like Artaud and Sade, Genet's strategy "is a ritual—the ritual of wish-fulfillment," (Hinchliffe, 1974, 74). Cixous goes further and categorizes Genet's writing as feminine inscription, as she states in *Newly Born Woman*, suggests that Genet's text displays *écriture féminine* par excellence.

In Genet's writing, Cixous argues, there is an abundance of other as well as continual variety and movement. She stresses that Genet's writing constantly changes shape as a result of this movement, so that his work is never arbitrarily fixed to represent (only) one truth or viewpoint," (Sellers, 1991, 142)

The play in nine scenes mirrors two worlds, the world of illusion and the world of reality. As a play-within-the-play, an upmarket brothel uses men of power in a series of debauching sexual fantasies. The outside, a revolution is raging in the streets of the unknown city. The brothel's owner is Imra, whose first client likes to appear in a bishop's attire. He is interested in the reality of things like the revolution outside the Balcony and the sins of women he experiences there. He enjoys his role and stays in the brothel. In different brothel rooms, clients enjoy and are obsessed with their role-play as a Judge, General, and a tramp, each played by his whore. Imra's room is of importance, for she is controlling all other rooms and her clients. Through an intricate arrangement of mirrors, she sees "what goes on in all private rooms," (Esslin, 1968, 214). She indulges in a role play that is not liked by her whore, Carmen. She also has a lover, George, the Chief of Police. She is worried about the war outside that its sound is getting louder and louder. Her nightmare is the winning of the rebel in the war.

One of the whores, Chantal, flees with Rogers the plumber of the Balcony to join the rebel. Imra asks Carmen to die with her, but she is all about making a flight from the house of illusions. Arthur, who plays an executioner role, wants money for his shirt, but Imra sent him to bring the news from outside warfare and fetch the Police Chief. The Chief arrives unexpectedly and brings the news that the queen is hiding, and the rebel surrounded the palace. All whore refuse to play the Chief's role, and Imra is anxious about the survival of her brothel. Finally, Irma plays the queen, and her brother survives as she promises its reopening at the end. Rogers is the one who dresses up as the Police Chief when the revolution outside is defeated.

On the political side of the play, Lacan shows interest in the symbolic presence of power that each influential figure manifests his power only to alienate the subject. Lacan draws a parallel between Aristophanes and Genet, who portrayed in his comedies Athens in crisis, as Lacan states.

Aristophanes attempts this wake-up, which consists in saying that we are ruining ourselves in this war without end and that there is nothing to do but stay at home, keep warm and rediscover one's wife. This is not something that is put forward as a moral, exactly. What is being suggested is that man resume his essential relationship with his state—moreover, without our knowing whether its consequences are all that salubrious. (247)

Each person with power, Judge, General, Police Chief, etc., played momentarily by the brothel clients, hides their reality in the function that they assume with their whores. A person who fervently disguises as someone in power reveals his *jouissance* in the role-play, and his relevant partner (a whore in the brothel) also joins in his guilty *jouissance*.

Thus, we see a bank employee come and dress up in the garments of a priest and take confession from a prostitute. The confession is of course nothing but a sham, though it must approximate the truth to some extent. In other words, something in the intension of the accomplice needs to make it possible for him at least to believe that she is taking part in some guilty *jouissance*. (248)

Why is that a guilty *jouissance*? Lacan intends that the performing function that masks the reality of the random clients is false and funny. They are in their delusion when they play the powerful men in the city. The discrepancy between their appearance in the scene of fantasy and their real identities produces that guilt that mixes up with their overriding passion—the image they create

for themselves in the brothel reflects a signifier's function. As such, Genet, according to Lacan, defines the society in its extreme dilapidation. He is fascinated by the Police Chief, whose role is not a favorite for any client, and he is the one who doesn't have a uniform on stage, which appears dressed as a phallus. It is a critical generative moment that shows the emergence of the signifier and imager (the phallus)—as the marker of desire—the orchestration of desire.

Furthermore, Lacan ceases upon this moment as it shows the imaginary register bluntly, in which the subject, the Police Chief, shows his ego ideal as how he would like to be, the center of power that controls everything. That is the position that the character chooses to be on the top or community as a dictator's personality represents. The Police Chief typifies a subject who desires. In his desire, he “encounters and embraces his own existence and thought authentically, a value that is not separate from his flesh,” (252). The man who was fighting until then to exclude the brothel from everyday existence. The brothel puts his imaginary world on display, and finally, it assimilates into the social system. The subject finds the place of his integration only on the condition of being castrated.

Consequently, the phallus also finds its status as a signifier of the desire of the Other. This status has the magic of making the subject in a position of either having or giving the phallus. This status elevates his position to the level of the father, the Other, and the creator of the signifiers. Indeed, for Genet, “Life is a comedy that man plays to himself. One can laugh at seeing him fall for his own deception, but when it becomes clear that he is not dupe of his actions or his fantasies, and cannot live without his illusions,” (Nadeau, 1969, 96).

Lacan returns to the Genet's *coup de théâtre* in *Seminar VIII: Transference*, where he emphasizes that the fantasy shows the subject and the *I* of fantasy, and this is possible because the fantasy is essentially untrue. If it were true, then the subject would have lost which way to go. As Lacan says, “the subject would perhaps no longer have any chance of survival. That is the place of the barred signifier, which is necessary for us to know that it is merely signifier. The indication of something inauthentic is the place of the subject qua first person in fantasy,” (Lacan, 2015, 392). By this first-person, Lacan means the subject of the unconscious that acts in the play. To give an example, when Saint Theresa is performed in the fantasy, she wears a wedding ring while remains under a black veil. This woman with a wedding ring is the *I* of the unconscious, camouflaged as a nun. The same applies to the other personae in the fantasy. Given Lacan's interest in his theory of fantasy as a stage for desire to perform itself, fantasy gives occasions to reenact a “dream of identity, symmetry and reversibility.” (Bowie, 1991, 178)

To end, Lacan begins his discussion with the notion of desire and its absence in the Western metaphysics. For him, the problem lies in the alteration of the expression of desire in the signifier. Submission to the signifier is making the absence of desire possible. By engaging with Gide and Genet, Lacan sets the stage for the performance of desire and *jouissance*. In Gide, Lacan explores desire in an unhappy childhood where the subject carries an infantile unsatisfied desire. In his autobiography, Gide relies on childhood memories to signify a desire by way of confessions, revealing secrets, guilt, and penitence.

On the other hand, Genet's *Le Balcon* stages a wild drama of fantasy, illusion, drives, and *jouissance*. Here this is all a performative game of satisfaction of the rampant drives that oscillates between masochism and sadism. Lacan tangentially refers to *Le Balcon*, to show it as an excellent example of comedy since Aristophanes. He underlines the role of the barred signifier, the phallus in comedy. He offers the genesis of the theory of the comedy and tragedy in a nutshell

in this session. Desire turns into a trap in the tragedy, but in comedy, desire makes an escape, and the protagonist survives. It is worth noting that Lacan also takes up the concepts of desire and *jouissance* in his seminal essay, *Kant avec Sade*. By examining Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, Lacan argues that he reveals *jouissance* in ultimate perversion, which Kant seeks from the moral law. Kant takes the detour of desire, whereas Sade remains in his hellish *jouissance*. In other words, the ethical and sublime man in Kant takes a flight from *jouissance* to enter the detour of desire, and Sade's wild libertine takes the law in his own hand to maximize the *jouissance*.

Notes:

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